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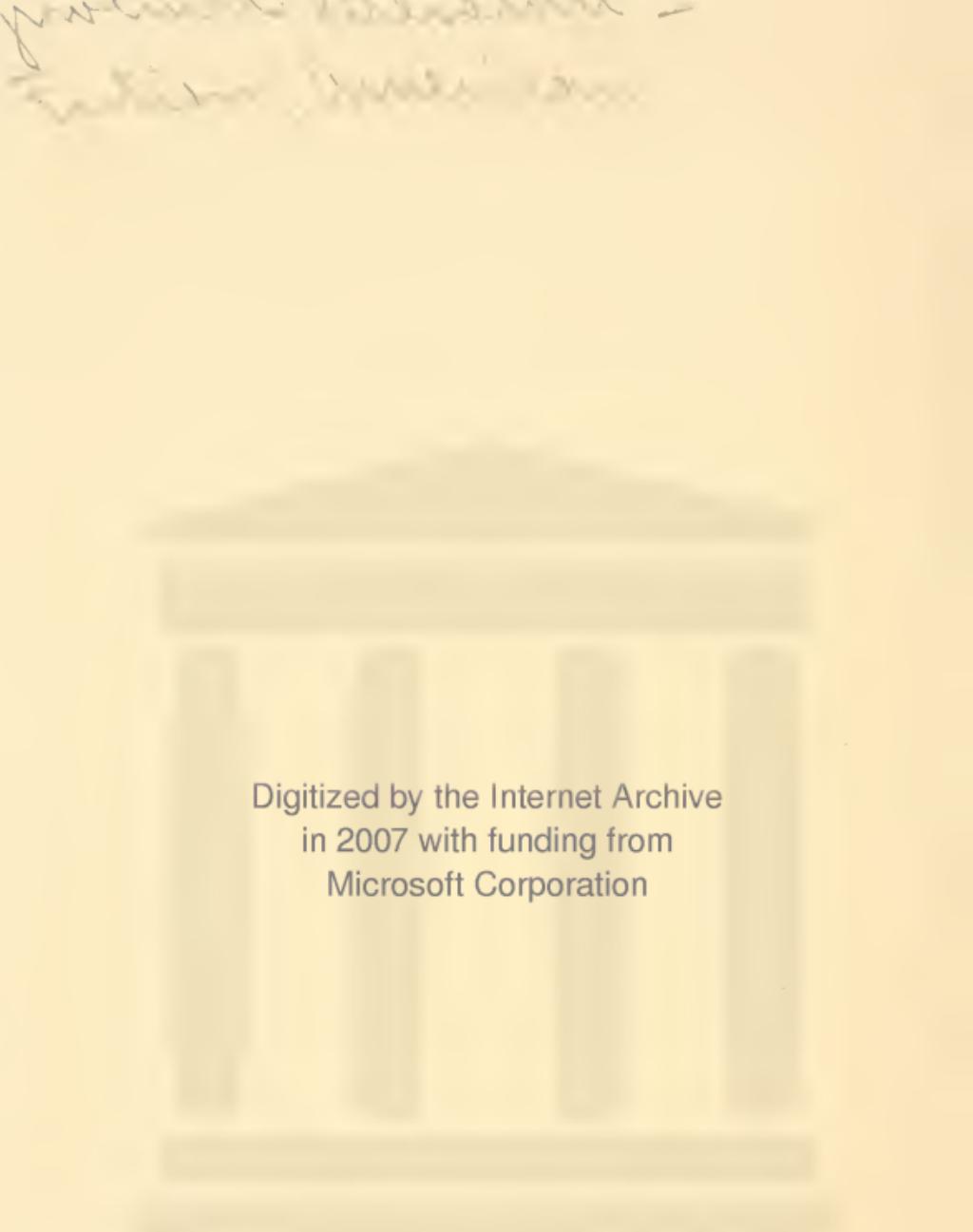


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IN
THE DESERT
OF
WAITING
BY
ANNIE ELLIOTT
JOHNSTON







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In the
Desert of Waiting

THE LEGEND OF
CAMEL-BACK MOUNTAIN

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IN
THE DESERT
OF WAITING

THE LEGEND OF
CAMEL-BACK MOUNTAIN

BY

Annie Fellows Johnston

Author of "The Little Colonel Series," "Big
Brother," "Joel: A Boy of Galilee," etc.

"Thy alchemist Contentment be"

— SADI

BOSTON
L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

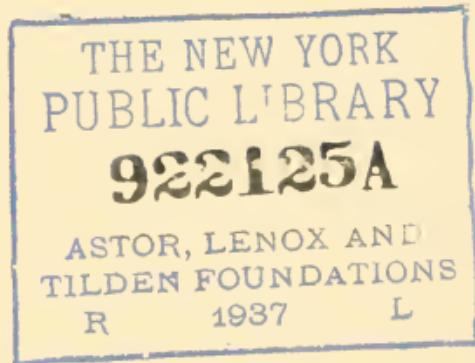
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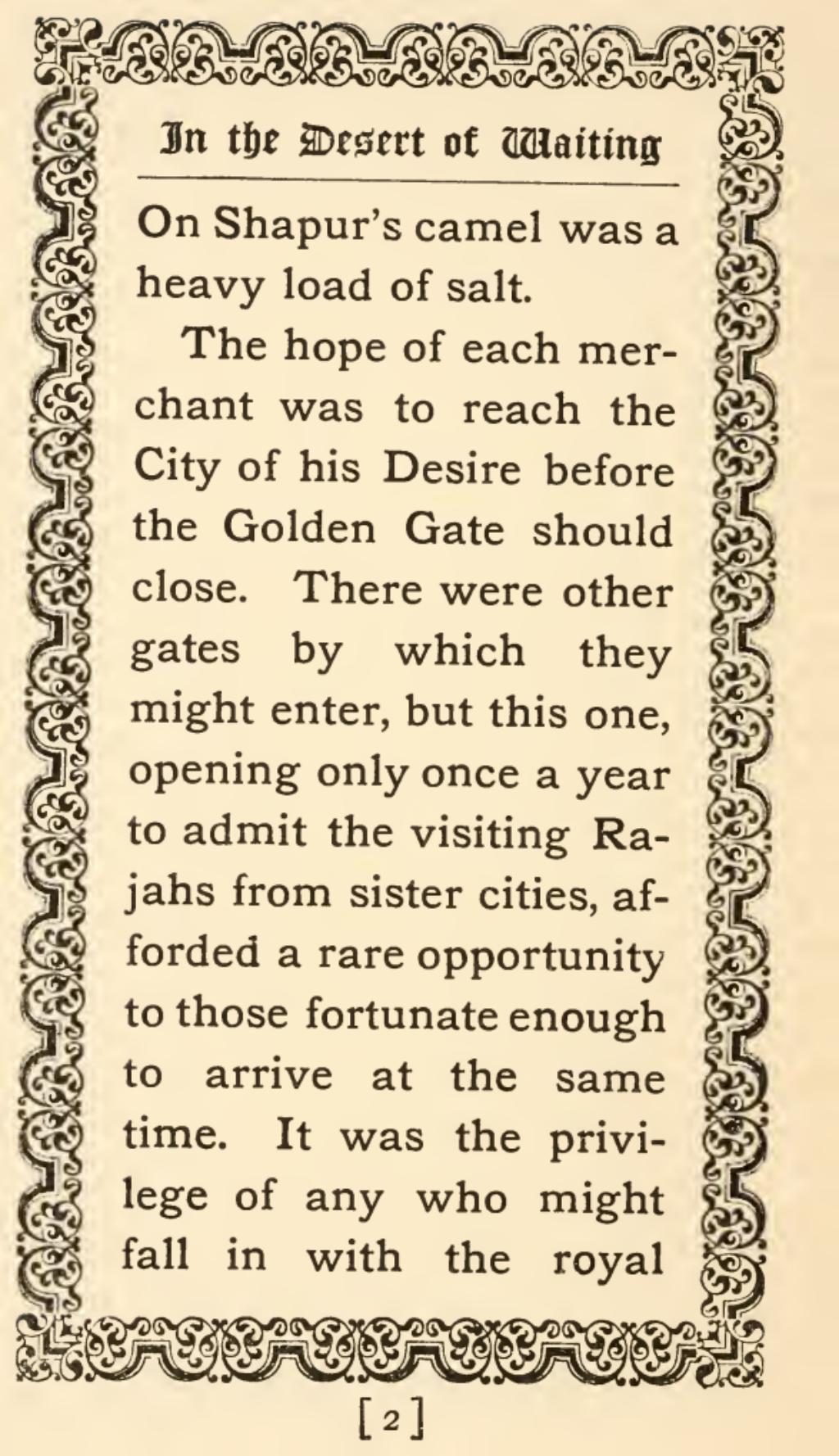
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Fifth Impression, October, 1907



O ye, who vainly question
Why there must ever lie twixt
man
And the far City of his Desire
Some desert waste of disap-
pointment,
Where he must watch the
Caravan
Pass on and leave him with
his baffled hopes,
Here is the reason.
By the grace of Allah,
Read !

ONCE upon a time, a caravan set out across the desert, laden with merchandise for a far distant market. Some of the camels bore in their packs wine-skins that held the richest vintage of the Orient. Some bore tapestries and some carried dyestuffs and the silken fruits of the loom.



In the Desert of Waiting

On Shapur's camel was a heavy load of salt.

The hope of each merchant was to reach the City of his Desire before the Golden Gate should close. There were other gates by which they might enter, but this one, opening only once a year to admit the visiting Rajahs from sister cities, afforded a rare opportunity to those fortunate enough to arrive at the same time. It was the privilege of any who might fall in with the royal

In the Desert of Waiting

retinue, to follow in the train to the palace of the ruling Rajah, and thus gain access to its court-yards. Wares displayed there for sale often brought fabulous sums, a hundred fold greater, sometimes, than when offered in the open market.

Only to a privileged few would the Golden Gate swing open at any other time. It would turn on its hinges for a messenger sent at a king's behest, or to any one bear-

In the Desert of Waiting

ing wares so rare and precious that only princes could purchase, but no common vendor could hope to pass its shining portal, save in the rear of the train that yearly followed the Rajahs.

So they urged their beasts with all diligence. Foremost in the caravan and most zealous of all was Shapur. In his heart burned the desire to be the first one to enter the Golden Gate, and the first one at the palace with his wares. But half way

In the Desert of Waiting

across the desert, as they paused at an oasis to rest, a dire lameness fell upon his camel, and it sank upon the sand. In vain he urged it to continue its journey. The poor beast could not rise under its great load.

Sack by sack he lessened its burden, throwing it off grudgingly and with sighs, for he was minded to lose as little as possible of his prospective fortune. But even rid of the entire load the camel could not rise, and

In the Desert of Waiting

So he sat upon the ground, his head bowed in his hands. Water there was for him to drink, and the fruit of the date palm, and the cooling shade of many trees; but he counted them all as naught. A fever of unrest consumed him. A baffled ambition bowed his head in the dust. When he looked at his poor camel kneeling in the sand he cried out, "Ah, woe is me! Of all men I am most miserable! Of all dooms mine

In the Desert of Waiting

is most unjust! Why should I, with life beating strong in my veins, and ambition like a burning simoon in my breast, be left here helpless on the sands, where I can achieve nothing and make no progress towards the City of my Desire?"

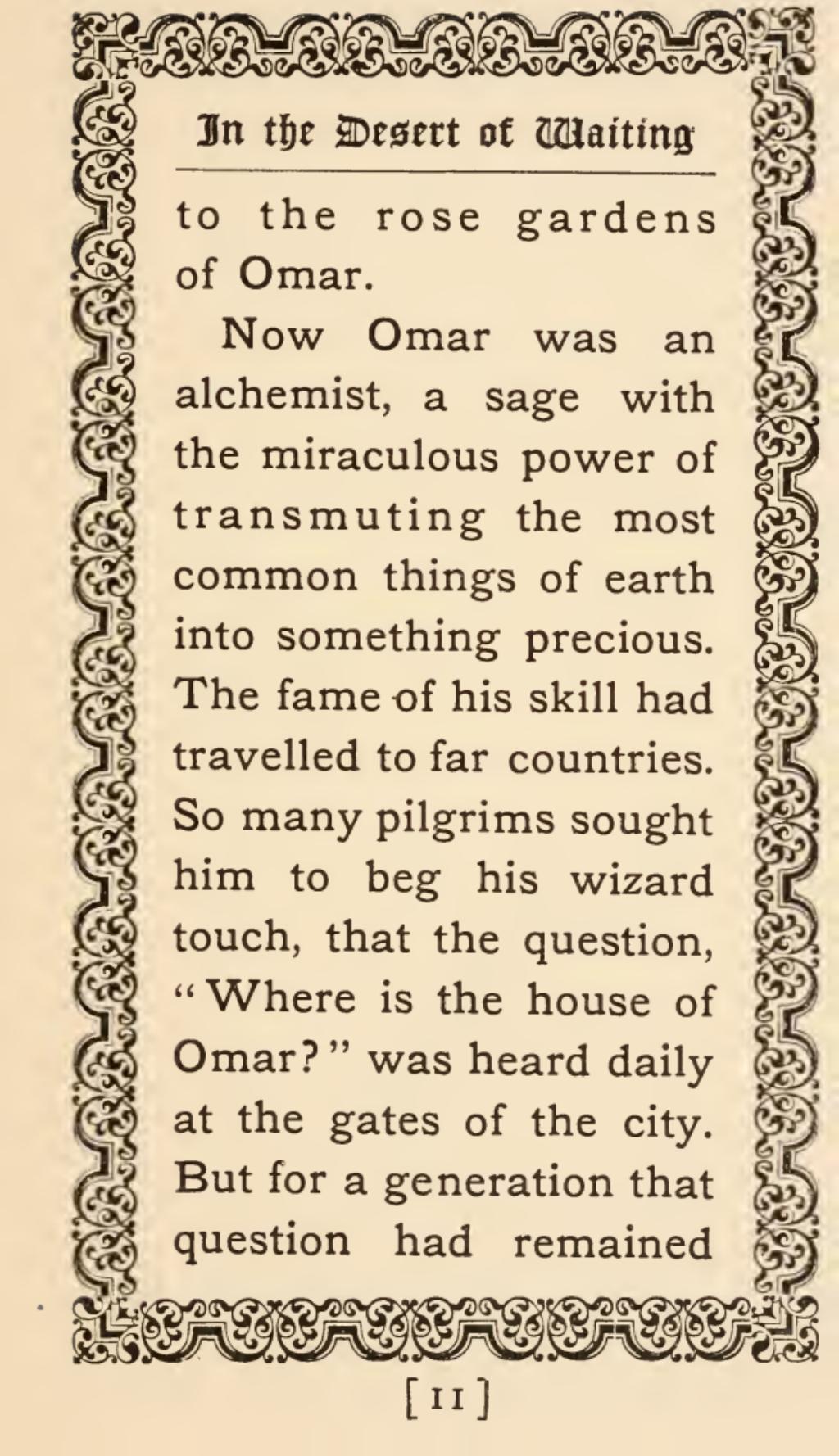
One day, as he sat thus under the palms, a bee buzzed about him. He brushed it away, but it returned so persistently that he looked up with languid interest.

"Where there are bees

In the Desert of Waiting

there must be honey," he said. "If there be any sweetness in this desert, better that I should go in its quest than sit here bewailing my fate."

Leaving the camel browsing by the fountain he followed the bee. For many miles he pursued it, till far in the distance he beheld the palm trees of another oasis. He quickened his steps, for an odor rare as the perfumes of Paradise floated out to meet him. The bee had led him



In the Desert of Waiting

to the rose gardens
of Omar.

Now Omar was an alchemist, a sage with the miraculous power of transmuting the most common things of earth into something precious. The fame of his skill had travelled to far countries. So many pilgrims sought him to beg his wizard touch, that the question, "Where is the house of Omar?" was heard daily at the gates of the city. But for a generation that question had remained

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unanswered. No man knew the place of the house of Omar since he had taken upon himself the life of a hermit. Somewhere, they knew, in the solitude of the desert, he was practising the mysteries of his art, and probing deeper into its secrets, but no one could point to the path leading thither.

Only the bees knew, and, following the bee, Shapur found himself in the old alchemist's presence. Now Shapur was a youth of gracious mien,

In the Desert of Waiting

and pleasing withal. With straightforward speech he told his story, and Omar, who could read the minds of men as readily as unrolled parchments, was touched by his tale. He bade him come in and be his guest until sundown.

So Shapur sat at his board and shared his bread, and rose refreshed by his wine and his wise words. And at parting, the old man said with a keen glance into his eyes: "Thou thinkest that be-

In the Desert of Waiting

cause I am Omar, with the power to transmute all common things into precious ones, how easily I could take the remnant of salt that is still left to thee in thy sack, and change it into gold. Then couldst thou go joyfully on to the City of thy Desire, as soon as thy camel is able to carry thee, far richer for thy delay."

Shapur's heart gave a bound of hope, for that is truly what he had been thinking. But at the next words it sank.

In the Desert of Waiting

“Nay, Shapur, each man must be his own alchemist. Believe me, for thee the desert holds a greater opportunity than kings’ houses could offer. Give me but thy patient service in this time of waiting, and I will share such secrets with thee that when thou dost finally win thee to the Golden Gate, it shall be with wares that shall gain for thee a royal entrance.”

Then Shapur went back to his camel, and in

In the Desert of Waiting

cause I am Omar, with the power to transmute all common things into precious ones, how easily I could take the remnant of salt that is still left to thee in thy sack, and change it into gold. Then couldst thou go joyfully on to the City of thy Desire, as soon as thy camel is able to carry thee, far richer for thy delay."

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In the Desert of Waiting

the cool of the evening urged it to its feet, and led it slowly across the sands; and because it could bear no burdens he lifted the remaining sack of salt to his own back and carried it on his shoulders all the way. When the moon shone white and full in the zenith he reached the rose gardens of Omar. He knocked on the gate, calling, "Here am I, Omar, at thy bidding, and here is the remnant of my salt. All that I

In the Desert of Waiting

have left I bring to thee, and stand ready now, to yield my patient service."

Then Omar bade him lead his camel to the fountain, and leave him to browse upon the herbage around it. Pointing to a row of great stone jars he said, "There is thy work. Every morning, before the sunrise, they must be filled with rose-petals plucked from the myriad roses of the garden, and the petals covered with water from the fountain."

In the Desert of Waiting

“A task for poets,” thought Shapur, as he began. “What more delightful than to stand in the moonlighted garden and pluck the velvet leaves?”

But after awhile the thorns tore his hands and the rustle and hiss underfoot betrayed the presence of serpents, and sleep weighed heavily upon his eyelids. It grew monotonous standing hour after hour, stripping the rose-leaves from the calyxes, until thousands

In the Desert of Waiting

and thousands and thousands had been dropped into the great jars. The very sweetness of the task began to cloy his senses.

When the stars had faded and the East was beginning to brighten, old Omar came out. "T is well," he said, viewing his work. "Now break thy fast and then to slumber, to prepare for another sleepless night."

So long months went by, till it seemed to Shapur that the garden must

In the Desert of Waiting

surely become exhausted. But for every rose he plucked another bloomed in its stead, and night after night he filled the jars. Still he was learning no secrets, and as the deadly monotony of his task began to eat into his soul he grew restless and began to ask himself questions. "Was he not wasting his life? Would it not have been better to have waited by the other fountain until some caravan passed by that would have carried him

In the Desert of Waiting

out of the desert solitude
to the dwellings of men?
What opportunity was
the desert offering him
greater than kings'
houses could give?"

And ever the thorns
tore him more sorely,
and the lonely silence of
the night weighed upon
him. Many a time he
would have left his task
had not the shadowy
form of his camel, kneel-
ing outside by the foun-
tain, seemed to whisper
to him through the star-
light, "Patience, Shapur!
Patience!"

In the Desert of Waiting

Once, far in the distance, he saw the black outline of a merchant caravan, passing along the horizon, where day was beginning to break. He did no work until it had passed from sight. Gazing after it, with a fierce longing to follow, he pictured the scenes it was moving towards—the gilded minarets of the mosques, the deep-toned ringing of bells, the cheerful hum of the populace, and all the life and stir of the market-place.

In the Desert of Waiting

When the shadowy procession had passed the great silence of the desert smote him like a pain. Again looking out he saw his faithful camel, and again it seemed to whisper, "Patience, Shapur, Patience! So thou, too, shall fare forth some day to the City of thy Desire!"

One day in the waning of summer Omar called him into a room in which he had never been before. "Now, at last," said he, "thou hast proved thy-

In the Desert of Waiting

self worthy to be the sharer of my secrets. Come! I will show thee. Thus are the roses distilled, and thus is gathered up the precious oil floating on the tops of the vessels. Seest thou this tiny vial? It weighs but the weight of one rupee, but it took the sweetness of two hundred thousand roses to make the attar it contains, and so costly is it that only princes may purchase. It is worth more than thy entire load

In the Desert of Waiting

of salt that was washed away at the fountain."

Shapur worked diligently at this new task, until there came a day when Omar said to him, "Well done, Shapur! Behold the gift of the desert, its reward for thy patient service in its solitude!"

He placed in Shapur's hands a crystal vase, sealed with a seal, and filled with the precious attar.

"Wherever thou goest this sweetness will open for thee a way and win

In the Desert of Waiting

for thee a welcome. Thou camest into the desert a common vendor of salt, thou shalt go forth an Apostle of my Al-chemy. Wherever thou seest a heart bowed down in some Desert of Waiting, thou shalt whisper to it, 'Patience! Here if thou wilt, in these arid sands, thou mayst find thy garden of Omar, and even from the daily tasks that prick thee sorest, distil some precious at-tar to sweeten all life.' So like the bee that led

In the Desert of Waiting

thee to my teaching, thou
shalt lead others to
hope."

Then Shapur went forth with the crystal vase, and the camel, healed in its long time of waiting, bore him swiftly across the sands to the City of his Desire. The Golden Gate, that would not have opened to the vendor of salt, swung wide for the Apostle of Omar. Princes brought their pearls to exchange for drops of his attar, and everywhere he went its sweetness opened

In the Desert of Waiting

for him a way and won
for him a welcome.

Wherever he saw a heart bowed down in some Desert of Waiting he whispered Omar's words and tarried to teach Omar's alchemy, that from the commonest experiences of life may be distilled its greatest blessings. At his death, in order that men might not forget, he willed that his tomb should be made at a certain place where all caravans passed. There at the crossing of the

In the Desert of Waiting

highways he caused to be cut in stone that symbol of patience, the camel, kneeling on the sand. And it bore this inscription, which no one could fail to see as he toiled past toward the City of his Desire:

“Patience! Here, if thou wilt, on these arid sands, thou mayst find thy Garden of Omar, and even from the daily tasks which prick thee sorest distil some precious attar to bless thee and thy fellow man.”

In the Desert of Waiting

A thousand moons waxed and waned above it, then a thousand more, and there arose a generation with restless hearts, who set their faces ever Westward, following the sun towards a greater City of Desire. Strange seas they crossed. New coasts they came upon. Some were satisfied with the fair valleys that tempted them to tarry, and built them homes where the fruitful hills whispered stay.

But always the sons of

In the Desert of Waiting

Shapur pushed ahead, to pitch their tents a day's march nearer the City of their Desire, nearer the Golden Gate which opened every sunset to let the royal Rajah of the Day pass through. Like a mirage that daily vision lured them on, showing them a dream gate of Opportunity, always just ahead, yet ever out of reach.

As in the days of Shapur, so it was in the days of his sons. There were some who fell by the way,

In the Desert of Waiting

and, losing all that made life dear, cried out as the caravans passed on without them, that Allah had forgotten them ; and they cursed the day that they were born, and laid hopeless heads in the dust.

But Allah, the Merciful, who from the beginning knew what Desert of Waiting must lie between every son of Shapur and the City of his Desire, had long before stretched out his hand over one of the mountains of his continent. With earthquake

In the Desert of Waiting

shock it sank before him. With countless hammer strokes of hail and rain-drops, and with gleaming rills he chiselled it, till as the centuries rolled by it took the semblance of that symbol of patience, a camel, kneeling there at the passing of the ways. And now, to every heart bowed down and hopeless, it whispers the lesson that Shapur learned in his weary Desert of Waiting:

“Patience! Thou cam-
est into the desert a ven-
dor of salt; thou mayst

In the Desert of Waiting

go forth an alchemist,
distilling from life's tasks
and sorrows such pre-
cious attar in thy soul,
that its sweetness shall
win for thee a welcome
wherever thou goest, and
a royal entrance into the
City of thy Desire!"

THE END

AND this, O Son of Shapur, is the secret of Omar's alchemy: To gather something from every one thou passest on the highway, and from every experience fate sends thee, as Omar gathered from the heart of every rose, and out of the wide knowledge thus gained of human weaknesses and human needs, to distil in thine own heart the precious oil of Sympathy. That is the attar

In the Desert of Waiting

that shall win for thee a welcome wherever thou goest
And no man fills his crystal vase with it until he has first
been pricked by the world's disappointments, and bowed
by its tasks.

Thou vendor of salt, who,
as yet, canst follow only in the
train of others, is not any
waiting well worth the while,
if, in the end, it shall give
thee wares with which to
gain a royal entrance?





